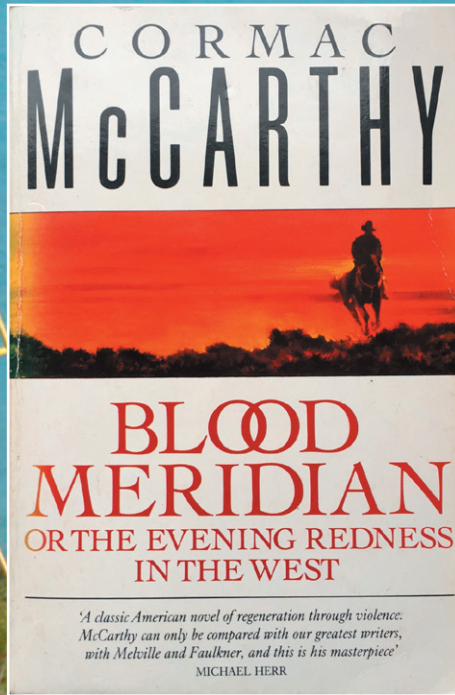


BLOOD MERIDIAN

AND

SAN DIEGO



JAMES LIGHTNER

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BLOOD MERIDIAN AND SAN DIEGO

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Cover photograph:

Cover of paperback edition of *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy, published in 1990 by Pan Books Ltd., London.

Figure 1 (facing page): Charles C. Parry (1823-1890) c. 1865, courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society WHS-46969

Also from San Diego Flora:

San Diego County Native Plants, 3d ed. (2011). A comprehensive color field guide to native and naturalized plants of San Diego County, incorporating the latest taxonomy from *The Jepson Manual*, 2d ed.

San Diego County Native Plants in the 1830s, The Collections of Thomas Coulter, Thomas Nuttall, and HMS Sulphur with George Barclay and Richard Hinds (2014). Accounts of the visits of UK naturalists to San Diego County in the 1830s, with detailed footnotes and historical background.

Parry's California Notebooks, 1849-51 (2014). A transcription of the notebooks of Dr. Charles C. Parry, also including letters to Dr. John Torrey, more than 200 historical and scientific footnotes, appendices, and detailed index.



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Figure 1. Dr. Charles C. Parry (1823-1890). Photo c.1865.

Good evening.

Stories of the American Southwest in the 19th century help us understand the evolution of the land and vegetation which are our common scientific interest. Accounts of the native people, explorers, missionaries, trappers, soldiers and pioneers who came to the region also appeal to us for reasons of human interest. I will be talking tonight about *Blood Meridian*, a celebrated novel that probably contains the most widely read account of the San Diego region in the eventful year 1850.

Blood Meridian

Thirty years ago I came across the Picador paperback edition of *Blood Meridian* while browsing in a store, and being unfamiliar with the book or its author, Cormac McCarthy, read it with interest. Since then the novel has been called a masterpiece and a classic of modern American literature. McCarthy is now known as one of our finest living writers.

The story is set just after the Mexican-American War, in the years 1848-50. It was inspired largely by *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*, the colorful notebook of Samuel Chamberlain, a young American who joined a company of fortune-seeking mercenaries after the war (or he claimed to - historians are unsure if his notebook was true). In 1848 the United States acquired from Mexico the greater part of the Old West, including Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Nevada and California. Despite peace with the U.S. Army and the extreme contraction of northern Mexican territory, people in the Mexican states of Chihuahua and Sonora struggled to defend against Indian-raids after the war. In *Blood Meridian* an American teenager called "the kid" takes part in armed expeditions across northern Mexico designed to extinguish the Indian threat. The kid ends up in San Diego in April 1850.

McCarthy's writing is original and distinctive. One characteristic I admire is the vernacular of his hardscrabble drifters. My favorite dialogues occur between the brothers Billy and Boyd in his later novel *The Crossing*, but there are some fine laconic exchanges in *Blood Meridian*. Here is one from page 278, when the kid is on the western bank of the Colorado River, about to head across the desert to San Diego:

Can you walk? said Toadvine.

I aint got no choice.

How much water you got.

Not much.

What do you want to do?

I dont know.

We could ease back to the river and lay up, said Toadvine.

Till what?

He looked toward the fort again and he looked at the broken shaft in the kid's leg and the welling blood.

You want to try and pull that?

No.

What do you want to do?

Go on.

I also admire the author's creative descriptions of natural terrain and local people, and the long, tortuous sentences he employs with desolate imagery, inventive vocabulary and mystical overtones. This excerpt is from page 300, when the wounded kid, dehydrated and famished even beyond the condition of most emigrants who crossed the desert in 1850, reaches the San Felipe Valley in San Diego County, which at the time included a small Indian settlement:

They were Diegueños. They were armed with short bows and they drew about the travelers and knelt and gave them water out of a gourd. They'd seen such pilgrims before and with sufferings more terrible. They eked a desperate living from that land and they knew that nothing excepting some savage pursuit could drive men to such plight and they watched each day for that thing to gather itself out of its terrible incubations in the house of the sun and muster along the edge of the eastern world and whether it be armies or plague or pestilence or something altogether unspeakable they waited with a strange equanimity.

Two pages later, the kid has recuperated somewhat and made it to Warner Hot Springs, and he can see the grazing-range of the Henshaw plain and the Palomar Mountains beyond:

They reached Warner's Ranch late the following day and they restored themselves at the hot sulphur springs there. There was no one about. They moved on. The country to the west was rolling and grassy and beyond there were mountains running to the coast. They slept that night among dwarf cedars and in the morning the grass was frozen and they could hear the wind in the frozen grass and they could hear the cries of birds that seemed a charm against the sullen shores of the void out of which they had ascended.

The term “dwarf cedars” appears in the 1827 journal of Jedediah Smith, who wrote an account of his solitary journey to San Diego. Smith was describing a plant-population along the coast south of San Onofre, possibly *Adenostoma fasciculatum*. McCarthy draws on a wide range of such sources, lending his novels authenticity.

While I like the distinctive writing in *Blood Meridian*, I should also say that the exaggerated cruelty and killing in many scenes, which have gained the book celebrity, startled, amused and disgusted me. The first thirty pages are a comic sequence of crimes and fights, while the middle of the text details murderous campaigns and village-mayhem as the mercenaries ride deep into Apache territories, battle, raid, take scalps and drink whiskey in remote Mexican towns. Earnest critics have commented gravely on the violence and criminality in the book and the history it traces; McCarthy has been praised as a truth-teller for revealing the sordid business of mid-century scalp-hunting. Before reading *Blood Meridian* I was unaware that Mexican state-governments paid gold for Apache scalps. However, I doubt McCarthy intended his story to be an indictment of westward expansion. I think he just crafted a roughly historical tale with odious outlaws, gave gravity to some of their soliloquies and otherwise embellished it in his inimitable way.

The exaggerated violence detracts from the book but the most disturbing passages in *Blood Meridian* are those involving a handicapped person whom the narrator calls “the idiot” and then refers to with the pronoun “it”. As far as I know the author has not given a reason for the absurd spectacle of the caged man or explained why he employed the dehumanizing pronoun “it” when referring to him. Probably he thought it was funny; he may also have believed that the diabolic notions of the manipulative Judge Holden have currency within us all. I would say the author mistook the comedic value of the bald Judge and his leashed “ape” who follow the kid into San Diego’s desert.

Historical Background

I would like us to look at the historical events that inspired *Blood Meridian*’s denouement and the book’s descriptions of our region’s people and vegetation.

The year the kid arrives in San Diego - 1850 - was particularly eventful. The botanist Charles Parry and colleagues completed their survey of the boundary between the USA and Mexico; ocean-ferris carried thousands

of travelers to and from San Diego, up and down the Pacific coast; Andrew Gray mapped New Town San Diego; the city received a charter and held its first elections, and California became a U.S. state in September of that year. All the while, thousands of pioneers streamed into San Diego County along the Gila trail from Santa Fe in the second major year of the California Gold Rush. Amid the incessant waves of travelers heading west a series of conflicts flared between Americans and the Yuma Indians, or Quechans, at the Colorado River crossing.

The conflict between the Yuma Indians and the mercenaries forms the climax of *Blood Meridian*. Imagine the Colorado River 170 years ago, before cities, dams or aquaducts. It was a vast current. Parry called it the Mississippi of the West (**Figure 2**). In spring and summer south of the Gila junction it measured well over 100 yards wide and was too deep to stand in. At times south of the Algodones Dunes the river-level would rise and flood; pushed by high tides from the Sea of California, the water would creep northwest for miles across the Imperial County desert, creating the illusion of a “New River” that perplexed scientists like Parry who initially thought the water flowed southeast from the mountains.

Indian settlements thrived along the Colorado’s fertile banks. When emigrants arrived at the terminus of the Gila trail they found a sprawling, cosmopolitan camp-site, a mini-Saint Louis, with wagon-trains waiting to cross the wide river. The numbers of emigrants surged in 1849 and 1850, and a thriving ferry-business grew. Parry traveled from San Diego to the Colorado late in 1849 with Amiel Whipple, Cave Couts and a con-

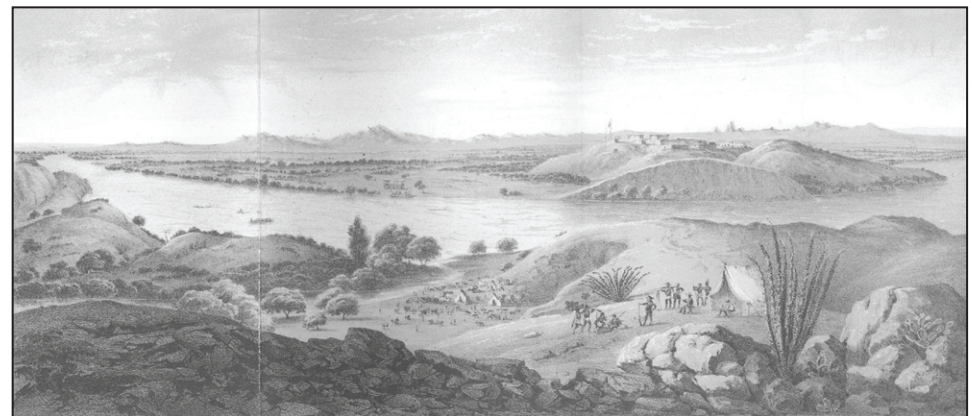


Figure 2. 1852 painting of Colorado River with Camp Yuma (formerly Camp Calhoun) opposite on hill and ferry-crossing at left; by John Russell Bartlett, Boundary Commissioner during Fillmore administration.

tingent of federal soldiers; according to Parry, one of Coutts' first acts was to string a rope across the river to help Americans cross. Parry's party found the Yuma Indians to be competent farmers who aided emigrants in exchange for currency and goods (Figure 3). Whipple wrote that the Yuma were the finest swimmers he had seen. No doubt the Indians welcomed the wealth and commerce brought by Americans.

The Yuma Massacre

In *Blood Meridian* the captain of the mercenaries, John Joel Glanton, leads the gang from Tucson to Yuma where they seize control of the ferry-crossing to the detriment of the Yuma Indians. The outlaws kill several Indians and threaten to kill more if the Yuma dare establish a competing ferry farther south. They extort travelers and quickly grow rich. Finally the Indians take revenge, attacking the gang's fort and killing Glanton and several others.



Figure 3. Drawing made by Charles Christopher Parry (1823-1890) late in 1849 of Anastasio, a Yuma capitán. Parry camped at the junction of the Gila and Colorado Rivers for 62 days, four months before the massacre.

The "Yuma Massacre" actually took place on April 22 or 23, 1850. Samuel Chamberlain claimed to have been outside the fort when it occurred and described it in his journal. There were other accounts; two of Glanton's men escaped to San Diego and testified, disingenuously, that the attack was unprovoked. McCarthy's depiction of the massacre as frontier justice is not far from the truth, although the account in *Blood Meridian* contains sensational imagined details.

In spring 1850 Governor Peter Burnett of the California territory received word of the Yuma Massacre and authorized a militia to ride to the river to secure American travelers from the apparently hostile Indians. A costly expedition proceeded in the second half of 1850. It was followed by a regular Army intervention in 1851 and establishment of Fort Yuma.

San Diego County According to *Blood Meridian*

Earlier we cited excerpts from *Blood Meridian* referring to the Indian-settlement at San Felipe and the landscape around Warner Springs. Pages 260-315 contain a number of passages which taken together present a vivid picture of San Diego County and Old Town in 1850. I would like to compare those descriptions with first-hand accounts of Parry, Richard Henry Dana and other witnesses.

At San Felipe, in addition to the above quote, *Blood Meridian* tells us the Diegueños:

fetches them a stew of lizards and pocketmice hot in clay bowls and a sort of pinole made from dried and pounded grasshoppers.

This revoltingly primitive meal contrasts with the June 16, 1850 entry of Charles Parry, who camped with the Indians at San Felipe for two nights in 1850, a month-and-a-half after the kid would have been there. Parry tells us the Indians offered him "prepared mezcal [from the heart of *Agave deserti*] which I found to be better eating than I expected...It is the main dependence for food of the Indians at the eastern base of the mountains, growing in the dry valleys & hills" (Figure 4).

Parry did not mean the local people lacked protein in their diet. In his journal-entry for June 15 he describes a feast of roasted venison shared with local Indians in Cuyamaca, where he rode on a day-trip out of San Felipe. Large game were not uncommon; there were also cattle and sheep around Warner's ranch and a range of fruits and vegetables there and at Santa Ysabel. By 1850 I doubt there were any Indians in San Diego County who required Stone-Age fare of lizards, mice and grasshoppers.



Figure 4. Desert Agave (*Agave deserti*) in bloom near San Felipe, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Parry wrote that this Agave was “the main dependence for food of the Indians” living in the San Felipe Valley in 1850.

Some pages later the kid leaves Warner’s ranch and commences the three-day, two-night walk to the town of San Diego. The main road would have passed via Santa Ysabel, Ramona and Rancho Bernardo. According to the book, on the first day of the hike:

All that day they climbed through a highland park forested with joshua trees and rimmed about by bald granite peaks. In the evening flocks of eagles went up through the pass before them and they could see on those grassy benches the great shambling figures of bears like cattle grazing on some upland heath. There were skifts of snow in the lee of the stone ledge and in the night a light snow fell upon them....Wild rams ghosted away up those rocky draws and the wind swirled down cold and gray from the snowy reeks above them, a smoking region of wild vapors blowing down through the gap as if the world up there were all afire.

This is an eloquent description of an imagined primordial scene but factually perplexing. Every route to San Diego from Warner’s is downhill; there would be no climbing over a mountain pass. No known Joshua Trees (*Yucca brevifolia*) grow naturally in the county, and while there are plenty of Mojave Yucca (*Yucca schidigera*), the only place there might be

a forest would be in lowlands east of San Felipe. Flocks of eagles, common in Alaska, were unlikely in our mountains; turkey-vultures would be more plausible. Wild rams might scramble in rocky draws on the desert side of the mountains but not on a trail from Warner’s to San Diego.

The appearance of multiple bears grazing like cattle strains credulity. McCarthy possibly drew the allusion from Cave Cout’s 1849 account of the Whipple Expedition, which referred casually to a purchase of bear-meat at Santa Ysabel. I am convinced Cout’s diary was mistakenly transcribed or that Cout himself was misinformed. Bears were present in Southern California but few diarists ever saw one - and bears are animals about which diarists remark. They were scarce because bears were the first animals, along with wolves and mountain lions, that Indians, ranchers and other settlers throughout the West sought to exterminate.

Another curious wildlife-reference occurs when “wolves and jackals” hunt near Carrizo Creek while the kid is crossing Anza-Borrego Desert. For centuries there have been plenty of coyotes in San Diego County, but I am not aware that wolves were in the county in the 19th century. Jackals live in Africa.

When the kid finally arrives in San Diego he makes his way to the shore of San Diego Bay. On page 303 the story tells us:

It was evening of the following day when they entered San Diego. The expriest turned off to find them a doctor but the kid wandered on through the raw mud street and out past the houses of hide in their rows and across the gravel strand to the beach.

Loose strands of ambercolored kelp lay in a rubbery wrack at the tideline. A dead seal. Beyond the inner bay part of a reef in a thin line like something foundered there on which the sea was teething. He squatted in the sand and watched the sun on the hammered face of the water. Out there island clouds emplaned upon a salmoncolored otherea. Seafowl in silhouette. Downshore the dull surf boomed...

He sat watching while the sun dipped hissing in the swells. [A] horse stood darkly against the sky. The surf boomed in the dark and the sea’s black hide heaved in the cobbled starlight and the long pale combers loped out of the night and broke along the beach.

He rose and turned toward the lights of the town. The tidepools bright as smelterpots among the dark rocks where the phosphorescent seacrabs clambered back. Passing through the salt grass he looked back. The horse had not moved. A ship’s light winked in the swells. The colt stood against the horse with its head down and the

horse was watching, out there past men's knowing, where the stars are drowning and whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea.

This is one of few precious moments of calm and meditation in the book; the last line exemplifies McCarthy's literary brilliance. The kid has suffered more than a year of continuous conflict and hardship in the company of merciless men. He arrives wounded in San Diego, a small settlement at the edge of the continent, and for the first time in his life walks to a beach, gazes at the ocean alone, watches the reflection of the fading sunset and can contemplate the liberating nature of the wild Pacific, at once mysterious barrier and immeasurably vast other-world.

The writing is evocative but the description of the place is again imprecise. In April 1850 the San Diego River defined the limits of Old Town. During the first half of the year the river ran around the town on its northern and western sides and emptied into San Diego Bay. The main road to and from Old Town, El Camino Real, crossed the river in a north-south direction about where Pacific Highway crosses it today. On the northern side of the river, the Mission Valley side, another road intersected El Camino Real connecting the San Diego Mission to La Playa (Figure 5). This La Playa road led to the hide-houses at the foot of Point Loma made famous in *Two Years Before the Mast*. In the book-passage we can visualize the kid and Tobin approaching Old Town on El Camino Real from the north whereupon the kid turns toward La Playa and the ex-priest wades through the river into town. We know from Parry that the river was about three feet deep on March 5, 1850, and there was no bridge. The area where the airport is today was then a giant marsh.

The kid passes "houses of hide" across gravel to a beach. This image and the horse on the beach are loosely borrowed from Dana, who stayed at La Playa fifteen years earlier. Dana says that the hide-houses were three miles from Old Town, not a short walk. Dana writes that the houses were "large building[s], made of rough boards" erected to store the heavy cattle-skins before they were loaded onto merchant-ships destined for New England. So the houses were of lumber. Moreover, by April 1850 the structures had been dismantled or re-purposed due to the closure of the mission-economy.

There were plenty of treacherous sandbars in San Diego Bay but few rocks at the time and no reefs that would have been visible from La Playa. Thousands of large rocks were trucked in decades later when engineers built the jetties and islands we know today around the bay. There were

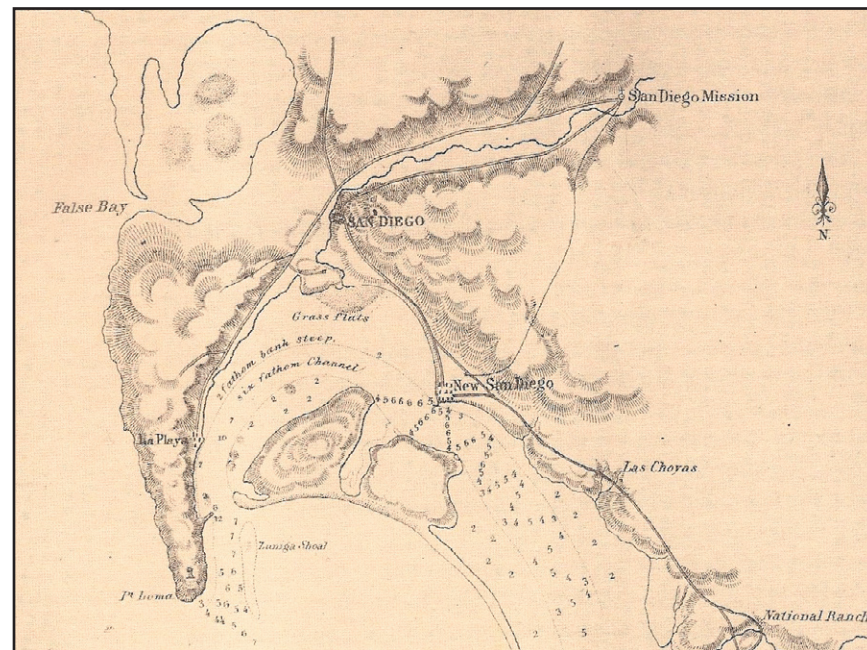


Figure 5. Map of San Diego Bay region created early in 1850 by Andrew Gray, US government surveyor, showing the San Diego Mission, the San Diego River, Old Town, the La Playa road between the mission and Point Loma, and the north-south road or El Camino Real.

no waves booming within earshot since the entire bay was protected from surf by Coronado Island, Ballast Point, and the enormous peninsula of Point Loma itself.

The book also tells of rough encounters in Old Town, and a reader may wonder whether similar events occurred historically. On page 267 three hard-boiled members of the Glanton gang ride to San Diego from Yuma to purchase supplies. David Brown asks a blacksmith in Old Town to saw down the barrels of a valuable British shotgun, leading to a threatening incident. All later drink in a "lazarous bodega run by a Mexican", where an altercation with soldiers arises. Brown sets a soldier on fire; the man dies "shriveled in the mud like an enormous spider." This amusing invention reads like inspiration for a cheap Tarantino film, or maybe *Game of Thrones*. Brown wakes in a jail-cell, bribes a guard to set him free, then murders the guard in the foothills before riding north toward Los Angeles. When two of his men return to the Colorado without supplies, Glanton and another five thugs ride to San Diego intending to recover their property. They torture a Mexican alcalde and his wife:

They'd halfhitched the rope about the tailpost of the bed and he loosed the rope and the alcalde and the wife collapsed into the floor.

They left them bound and gagged and rode out to visit the grocer. Three days later the alcalde and the grocer and the alcalde's wife were found tied and lying in their own excrement in an abandoned hut at the edge of the ocean eight miles south of the settlement. They'd been left a pan of water from which they drank like dogs and they had howled at the booming surf in that wayplace until they were mute as stones.

Several histories note that John Joel Glanton did ride to San Diego in April 1850. He kept dozens of mules there and deposited thousands of dollars of valuables with the County Judge, John Hays. Douglas Martin's 1954 book *Yuma Crossing* states that Glanton:

rode off to San Diego with a number of his men to buy a stock of groceries and liquor. There are stories that he strung the mayor up on a tree for a few moments because a ferryman had been thrown in the town jail, but this is probably a slight exaggeration. Naturally, he and his men did patronize the hot spots of San Diego and, while they were enjoying themselves, the Yumans held a few councils of war and decided what to do..."

The detained ferryman was in fact named David Brown. According to an article by a writer named Theodoro, published on January 8, 1851 in the *Daily Alta California* and reproduced in a collection called *Exterminate Them: Written Accounts of the Murder, Rape and Enslavement of Native Americans During the Gold Rush* (editors C.E. Trafzer and J.R. Hyer, 1999), Brown was hired as a deputy sheriff in Los Angeles later in 1850, and Theodoro interviewed him. Brown told Theodoro he accompanied Glanton to San Diego, was involved in a quarrel in an Old Town saloon, shot and killed a soldier, and was arrested there and placed under guard. Glanton supplied Brown with \$500 to bribe the guard to let him escape; when Brown and the guard were outside town, Brown held up the guard to retrieve the money then parted ways. Theodoro implies that Brown left the guard alive. Following his escape, authorities in San Diego posted a reward for Brown's re-capture. Later sources confirm that Brown continued working in Los Angeles until 1854, when he killed another man in a saloon-fight. After that second time, the aggressive drinker was hung.

According to the article in the *Daily Alta California*, after assisting Brown's escape Glanton rode back to the Colorado with supplies, arriving at the crossing on April 21, 1850. Theodoro also tells the story of the Yuma Massacre, claiming as his source an Indian chief and noting the Yuma were proud of killing Glanton.

In March 1850 the alcalde of San Diego was Thomas Sutherland, a caucasian American and English-speaker. Sutherland had recently emigrated from Wisconsin along the Gila trail in company with Agoston Haraszthy. Haraszthy was elected the first sheriff of San Diego County and organized construction of the first county jail, which was completed in 1851. So there was no Mexican alcalde and no jail in April 1850. Joshua Bean succeeded Sutherland as alcalde and was then elected the first mayor of San Diego in June 1850; Sutherland became District Attorney. I have found no report of a factual nature suggesting Sutherland, Bean or any leader or merchant was tortured or kidnapped by Glanton or his men. Victims deposited eight miles south of Old Town would not have heard booming surf; the marshland by Chula Vista is flat and calm.

Historical Fiction

I have taken your time this evening to point out that a historical novel contains fictional elements. Of course it does, you are thinking; it never pretended to be just a history book.

One reason to examine the historical accuracy of *Blood Meridian* is that the novel has been interpreted with great seriousness by many critics and students. I would guess a large number of readers view as generally truthful the book's descriptions of land, natural life, people and events, including at San Diego.

It may be McCarthy's particular genius that he writes so well at times, with such originality and rich vocabulary and marvelous sentences full with philosophical implications, that his readers grow entranced - they miss or forget the irony; they think the narrator is a literary prophet. By examining the details in the text, we come to see that the author was primarily a satirist. *Blood Meridian* is a perverse parody of Old-West stories like Samuel Chamberlain's. Moreover, it adumbrated a culture-wide shift to hyperbolic violence in books, t.v., film and other media. In 2020 we are acutely aware that contemporary entertainment competes to shock us with extreme characters, extreme situations, extreme violence and fantastical descriptions. The most successful works commercially combine such imagined extremes with appeals to the intellect - just as *Blood Meridian* does. First published in 1985, *Blood Meridian* balanced preposterous excesses with thoughtful ruminations before such balancing became banal. As San Diego is a subject of the book, it is worthwhile to keep that in mind.